PRESENT-DAY CONDITIONS OF FREEMASONRY

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"We must learn to let go of the old that ages in order to lay hold of the old that ages not."

EVERY man will look at life, and the things of life, through his own spectacles. These are tinted by his own temperament, and most likely by his own prejudices. However dogmatically he may declare that this and that are self-evidently true, he can express no more than a personal reaction to what are accepted by himself as the governing facts. The value of any reasoned judgment is not so much in the conclusions reached, as in the mode of approach - the finding of a new angle from which to estimate events or tendencies. Thus in writing of present-day conditions of American Masonry the best that can be hoped for is a survey that may be within reasonable distance of the exact truth. However faulty the reasoning or inadequate the expression, the effort here is to present a fairly clear picture of the Craft, to measure its more recent progress and to guess, if no more, at the direction of its travel into the immediate future.

It is to repeat a threadbare commonplace for one to assert that the present is a time of change. As matter of fact life itself is the sum of change, and human society can not be static and continue to exist. But in this our own time events beyond the common have forced shifts and changes so great and sudden that all things are unsettled. Ideas and institutions that had been regarded as most stable have suffered shock and betrayed weaknesses hitherto unsuspected. Petrine foundations and Masonic landmarks have alike been tested and often found wanting. Wise men are digging about the bases of their social structures, to discover what parts are weakened or decayed, that so repairs may be made, and collapse avoided.

This may seem a strange preface in speaking of an institution that has somewhat foolishly boasted of its immutability. For there have been and still are brothers who will have it that Masonry cannot suffer change. For them the landmarks are immovable, and he who would suggest innovation, whether in form, method or ideals, is regarded as a profaner of the temple. Yet every social agency is governed by the laws of being; life is predicated on adaptability to changing environment. The course of time is littered with the ruins of institutions that have failed to adapt themselves to changing conditions.

"All human things," says Carlyle, "are, have been and forever will be, in movement and change.... How often, in former ages, by eternal creeds, eternal forms of government, and the like, has it been attempted, fiercely enough, and with destructive violence, to chain the future under the past ... Man's task here below, the destiny of every individual man, is to be by turns Apprentice and Workman; or, say rather, Scholar, Teacher, Discoverer; by nature he has a strength of learning, for imitating; but also a strength for acting, for knowing on his own account.... The true past departs not, nothing that was worthy in the past departs; no truth or goodness realized by man ever dies, or can die; it is all still here, and, recognized or not, lives and works through endless change."

It is the growing sense of impending change - of insecurity if you will - that in opinion of the present writer is the most remarkable and most encouraging condition in present-day Masonry. In our

Fraternity, as in all other truly living institutions, there is a clash of opinions, becoming increasingly vehement as the issues are more clearly defined. The differences between modernist and fundamentalist are not confined to the churches; in every social agency there is debate between the static and dynamic elements. In proportion as there is vigour to such discussions will be the vitality of the institution. One might have despaired a few years ago of any real intellectual life in Masonry; today he will be encouraged by the evidences of mental activity and of thought devoted to the better things of the Craft.

There are some few radicals in Masonry - stormy fellows, who would indiscriminately destroy as preliminary to any rebuilding, to whom repair and adjustment are words abhorrent. They are matched at the other extreme by a diminishing number of die-hard conservatives, who would yield no jot or tittle of the heritage received from the fathers. The great body of thinking Masons, however, are between these extremes; Masonic modernists and fundamentalists are alike concerned for the welfare of the Society, however much they may dimer as to the means that should be employed to assure its permanency. From the discussions that have already begun, and that will be carried on with increasing vigour, we can believe that the proper course will emerge. Only the most extreme of the conservatives will hold out against the necessity for change; the extent and method will require the wisdom of the Craft to decide. The very nature of the brotherhood precludes aught that is revolutionary. Masons whose thought is worth considering will agree, with Bacon, that "men in their innovations should follow the example of time itself; which indeed innovateth greatly, but quietly, by degrees scarce to be perceived."

Revolutions are short-lived; they exhaust themselves of very fierceness. They mark the threshing-floors that God has placed through the centuries, whereon with bleeding feet men have beaten out some grain of truth from the gathered chaff of error and of wrong. In spite of some of the wild-eyed prophets of disaster no thinking American will fear material revolution. But there are also revolutions of thought that silently shake all social edifices. Who will deny that some such revolution is even now causing strange movements in our country? Our whole social system is being subjected to strains. Men are inquiring as to open wrongs and hidden iniquities. At such time no individual or institution can sit by indifferently.

Masons, among others, are realizing that the Craft, as a social agency, must assume its full share of responsibility; must seek out its duty and bend every energy to its performance. It is not enough to say, at this juncture, that every real Mason can be depended upon to act as a good citizen should. Good causes are carried to victory by mass effort. The potentiality of Freemasonry in the United States is beyond aught we have dreamed. It can and should be used to strengthen the forces that are striving for the triumph of good. The matters that are of partisanship are not within our province; the great problems that affect human life in all relationships, wherein justice is concerned - these certainly are not foreign to Masonry, unless all our professions are to expend themselves in words. It is for Masonic lodges to seek out the truth in the affairs that are vital to the community or the nation. Having found out the right, there is but one side the Craft can take.

THERE IS A NEW NOTE IN THE FREEMASONRY OF TODAY

This writing, however, is not an argument, but rather a brief survey of the situation. One must be dull indeed who has not recognized in the Masonry of today a new and serious note; a growing desire on the

part of brothers to be informed in such manner that their Masonry will have a richer meaning. They are carefully and cautiously taking steps toward a more practical and positive conception of the Craft. They are asking that it shall aid them more effectively to self-realization, that it shall also give them an outlet for energies hitherto repressed or expended in lines less responsive and less deserving of confidence. American Masonry is seeking to descend from the sterile heights, is slowly but surely equipping itself to strive valiantly for God and humanity. Who, then, shall say it nay?

To the mind of this writer it is but part of this same spirit of change for the better that men are seeking the spirit of Masonry with less regard for its letter. One may wonder at times whether relaxation of the old regulations as to the quality of men admitted is always wise. Yet, to take the matter of physical perfection as an example, the old requirement was frequently carried to absurd lengths. Trivial imperfections were regarded by some authorities as sufficient to bar men of high quality and unexceptionable character. Today stress is laid rather upon qualifications of head and heart, and less on missing finger-joints or crooked toes. Only again one asks whether in many cases the eagerness to secure members does not prompt repudiation of the former rules of selection. This also opens inquiry as to the great numbers that are clamouring for admittance at the doors of all our lodges. Are these all "duly and truly prepared" in heart and mind? Or are they brought hither by expectations that can never be satisfied, and by desires that are not in harmony with the spirit and purposes of Masonry? Because of this unprecedented influx our lodges are condemned to labours that are, at the best, but secondary. It is an absurdity to declare that these are Master Masons, properly instructed and having skill of craft, who have been perfunctorily conducted through the initiatory ceremonies of the degrees. But here also is cause for encouragement. Grand Lodges have recognized the fact that the education of a Mason is not completed when he has learned a few signs and grips and can make passable answers to some short catechetical form. Tentative programs are being prepared and experimented with, having as object the information of brothers, so that they can more effectively work as builders on the temple of humanity.

With these always well-meant and sometimes wise efforts to further Masonic education there has been a dropping of much that before brought ridicule upon the Fraternity. Some few persist in attaching to the institution a mystical or occult content or significance. These are the jugglers of words; men whose ballast of reasoning is insufficient to hold down the lighter cases of imagination, and who go ballooning in cloud-land whithersoever the vagrant winds of fancy may blow. Men of today are apt to turn from that one who claims to discover portentous secrets in some dust-heap of time, or who affects by jumbled numbers or unmeaning words to come upon a wisdom transcending human wit.

OUR FREEMASONRY IS FORWARD LOOKING

Freemasonry of our time is forward looking. What it may have received from the past of value will be jealously preserved. But not every dust-covered relic of a time gone by is worth preservation. The antique tools and arms of our predecessors may have place in a museum; they are no longer for use for our generation. Our great society is a matter-of-fact affair. Its manner of birth and course of development are sufficiently well known to us so that we can put its history under scrutiny, nor fear that we are profaning some sacred thing in putting out our hands in inquiry or examination. Freemasonry is, and has been from the beginning, a middle-class society. Its membership is a fair cross section of the best and staunchest elements of our American life. We have among us no school of the prophets, no workers of magic, whether white or black.

For the most part the Craft is made up of intelligent men, honest and reliable in all the relationships of life. The society was formed for mutual assistance, and its purposes remain unchanged as signified in the ternary of Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth. It has unused capital in the good opinion of the world, the loyalty of its adherents, and it stands beyond any other secular society in its potentialities. That it has enemies is a point unduly stressed by some. The greatest enemy of Freemasonry is to be found within itself - the ignorance of some and the indifference of many more. These stifle the noblest aspirations, and render ineffective the efforts of brothers who have the vision and would lead the Craft to fields of resultful labour.

It is no disheartening study to view the Masonic field. We discover a great society moving slowly but surely to its appointed work for human good, becoming possessed of a conviction of its high mission, unwilling longer to waste time and energies in mere barrack ground maneuvers, but demanding a place in the armies of righteousness.

"Not in vain the distance beacons, forward, forward let us range; Let the great world spin forever down the ringing grooves of change."

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